

The Flickerville Mountain Farm and Groundhog Ranch: An Apprenticeship

All right. You've bought the farm, so to speak, and you're ready to become your own boss, set out to make a comfortable income in the inspiring solace of the bucolic countryside. Free at last.

A good start, but you've already bumped up against the first rule of Beginning Farming 101. To wit, don't count on making a comfortable living, at least at the outset. The second rule: your days of "freedom" are over, because the farm is a demanding, dominating taskmaster. And the third rule: brace yourself for failures and frustrations because there will be many.

This is the story of the Flickerville Mountain Farm and Groundhog Ranch, a small organic fruit, vegetable, and flower operation in south-central Pennsylvania—far enough from the big city to provide the solace, yet close enough to assure marketing possibilities.

The first three rules of beginning farming, as well as dozens more, have been written in bold face and learned in painful ways by the two newspaper reporters who started Flickerville Moun-

tain Farm in 1983. From the start, the idea was to make the farm into a self-supporting unit. But despite extensive gardening experience, neither of us neophyte farmers had the slightest notion of what we were getting into.

Our knowledge was scant, our naivete massive, our bodies unprepared for the bone-crushing fatigue that would dog us. Our psyches were not ready for the hurtful shock of such vagaries of nature as ongoing drought, occasional hail, and unexpected frost. But we endured, inspired by the example of others who had made it and buoyed by a belief that our farm could, in time, pay its way and provide a modest living for its owners.

Over the first 5 years, the farm expanded from a large garden to 15 intensively planted acres, producing more than 70 varieties of fruits and vegetables and several dozen kinds of flowers. Almost all of the farm's output is sold 100 miles away in the Washington, DC, area—at farmers' markets, in custom-packed bags to about 100 consumers in

Ward Sinclair, former *Washington Post* Agriculture Reporter and Co-owner, with Cass Peterson, of Flickerville Mountain Farm and Groundhog Ranch, Dott, PA



Customers at a Washington, DC, farmers' market enjoy farm fresh products from the Flickerville Mountain Farm and Groundhog Ranch in Pennsylvania. (USDA Photo by Larry Rana, 89BW1031-17)

a large office building, and to restaurants and stores through a cooperative formed with half-a-dozen other Pennsylvania organic growers.

Learning the Rules

The Flickerville Mountain Farm is not yet an overwhelming success, but it has grown with enough promise that one of the partners gave up his city job in 1988 to work the farm full time, with the other partner not far behind. Ours is a story of rules being learned, then broken right and left, and learned again. It is also a story that provides some insights into the importance of "management," a term that really means "keeping an eye on the ball."

One central key to this farm's limited success is management. Texts and

treatises by experts generally are clear enough in their cautions about beginning farming. But none of these substitutes for the hard-knocks knowledge gained from hands-on experience; none seems to adequately stress the critical importance of daring to take risks, of carefully allotting time to farm tasks, and of constantly discussing every facet of the enterprise.

At the outset, for example, it was clear that the first problem at Flickerville Mountain Farm would be time. We lived and worked more than 100 miles away from our property. That meant our farming would be restricted to weekends, vacations, and off-days. That meant also that while we were thinking big, we had to farm small. And it meant that our newspaper jobs, at least into

the foreseeable future, would have to help the farm pay for itself.

The Plan

Given that dilemma, one of the first things we beginning farmers did was draw up a 5 year plan intended to help us achieve our goal of a self-supporting farm. It was an ambitious plan in some ways, but we were realistic in understanding that to fulfill the plan, the farm would have to expand each year and the physical demands on the owners would increase exponentially.

The plan was drafted in a way that called for avoiding debt as much as possible, using the off-farm income to finance the gradual acquisition of equipment and material. Because of our often obsessive zeal—an important ingredient, by the way—each of the plan's incremental goals was met. "The plan," as it became known, was the central focus of virtually every discussion about the farm's operation.

As the plan dictated, income from sales doubled each year. This meant growing more crops, tending more land, trying more varieties, and paying greater attention to marketing. In accordance with this blueprint, we acquired small equipment first—a rototiller, hand tools, a backpack sprayer, a couple of wheel hoes. As expansion occurred, again according to the plan, we added larger equipment including a diesel tractor, a rotovator, a rotary mower, a plastic mulch-laying machine, a commercial-size van, a manure spreader, a tank sprayer, and a cooler.

In hindsight, we unknowing amateurs would make only two major revisions in our plan. Instead of waiting until the fourth year, we would have acted earlier to erect a greenhouse and to install a drip irrigation system. The greenhouse, although it meant a whole new

range of managerial details, allowed us to save money and augment income by growing our own transplant seedlings and offering bedding plants for sale. The drip system, made mandatory by droughts in 3 of the first 4 years, quickly paid for itself after it was installed in time to avoid a wipeout in the Big Dry of 1988.

Reasonably successful attainment of "the plan" was not the end, however. A second 5-year plan, with new goals, was drawn up. The plan envisioned a second greenhouse and a walk-in cooler, both to be built by the farmers; a larger truck to haul goods to market; and a structure for storing and processing dried flowers and herbs into wreaths and other high-value decorative items. The plan included the possibility of adding a small kitchen that could increase earnings by converting farm produce into value-added items such as organic pesto, pickles, herb mixes, sauces, and preserves.

Although not cast in concrete, the new plan represents goals and ideas—concepts born mostly during endless nocturnal discussions over the kitchen table. The thrust is to seek enough diversity that the farm's fortunes will not rely on a few crops. It looks toward a time when perhaps the farmers can devote less of their energies to marketing activities that now require driving upwards of 900 miles a week during the growing season. It envisions providing work for a few more nearby residents in an area in where jobs are scarce.

Down to Basics

Every farm, of course, is different. But some of the experiences at the Flickerville Mountain Farm and Groundhog Ranch (a name chosen to lure and amuse farm-market customers) may have universal application for be-

ginning farmers, particularly those who intend to grow specialty crops. After Rules 1, 2, and 3, these are some of the other basics:

- *Focus:* If the farm is to be more than a hobby or a retreat, decide on your focus and don't overreach. Start slowly, as though undertaking an apprenticeship, and pay attention to details. Grow a few varieties—things that are likely to find a ready market—and learn to grow them well. Remember that a cow is more demanding than a carrot. Unless you live on the farm, are near enough to provide regular attention, or have hired labor, it's probably best to not even think about livestock.

At Flickerville Mountain Farm, the first year's crop focused on sweet basil and a few other fresh-cut herbs that grew well and sold quickly. That led to a wholesale contract to expand production and a decision to go to a weekly farmers' market with more items.

- *Plan:* Once you've settled on a focus, draw up a plan for the enterprise. The plan can, and probably should, be flexible. But it also should cover at least several years, simply because successful farming rarely happens quickly. The plan should be reasonable, geared to your financial reality, and yet demanding in that it forces you to keep reaching for the final goal.

At Flickerville Mountain Farm, the plan covered the first 5 years, but details were changed from time to time as events dictated. As markets and production possibilities became apparent, flowers—fresh-cut and for drying—were given higher priority in the plan.

- *Manage:* First, boss yourself mercilessly. Figure out your priorities in terms of work that must be done and stay after yourself until the task is completed. Discuss and set priorities with a partner, if you have one. Divide areas

of responsibility, according to who does what best or most readily. Make regular task lists based on the priorities and then cross off each item as it is completed—a helpful step in giving you a sense of progress and accomplishment.

At Flickerville, I operate and repair most of the mechanical equipment and oversee soil preparation and improvement. My partner manages the greenhouse and flower operations. I maintain books and records; she is in charge of fruit tree maintenance and pest control. We divide planting, harvesting, and marketing duties, seed and plant purchases, and general grunt work.

- *Scrimp:* Modern agriculture is strewn with examples of farming enterprises that failed because of inadequate financing or excessive debt, or lack of fiscal conservatism. So be miserly in the extreme—avoid debt and pay as you go whenever possible; save everything from lumber and nails to wire and plastic jugs. They always have a use.



The Flickerville Mountain Farm greenhouse keeps part owner Cass Peterson busy with transplant seedlings and bedding plants. (USDA photo by Larry Rana)



Ward Sinclair harvests one of the many types of lettuce offered by the Flickerville Farm. This row shows tomatoes and lettuce being grown together. With the lettuce harvested, the tomatoes have plenty of room to develop on the plastic covered rows, eliminating the need to stake the tomato plants. (USDA photo by Larry Rana)

The Flickerville debt is limited to the farm mortgage and payments on the tractor and the van. All other equipment, fruit and Christmas trees, and perennial plants were cash purchases as money became available. Lumber from dismantled chicken houses was recycled into board fences, and castoff telephone cable spools became irrigation hose holders. Old motor oil goes into tool-cleaning buckets or is used to treat fenceposts.

- *Clockwatch:* Time, or lack of it, is always a critical factor on the farm. It is even more important to the part-time farmer. So look for ways to economize on time; look for shortcuts that make the tasks easier and quicker; and avoid duplication of effort.

At Flickerville, extensive use of black plastic mulch reduces the time needed for weeding and cultivation; some crops are bagged or boxed in the field to avoid travel time and double-handling; harvesters separate the different grades of produce in the field to avoid an extra step at the packing shed.

- *Study:* Knowledge is just as critical as time, so become a relentless student of what you are doing. Pay attention to the ways of other farmers, visit other farms and ask questions, and read everything you can get your hands on. Between the Extension Service, Federal and State agriculture departments, land-grant universities, and private presses, a multitude of farming information is available. Mine these sources.

We have accumulated a large library of useful material—old horticultural how-to books, old USDA yearbooks and other farming bulletins, and vegetable-growing guides. We attend winter workshops and pester our farming friends with questions about growing techniques and problems.

- *Dare:* Farming is a high-risk business to begin with, but you must dare to challenge the conventional wisdom from time to time. The experts, for example, warn that you should grow nothing unless you have a market for it. Not so. As your enterprise expands, grow a few things each year that will be new to your customers and give you a marketing edge on your competitors.

On a whim 4 years ago, the Flickerville farmers planted purple cauliflower. It proved so successful and so lucrative that it is now a fall standard for us. This year's new market introductions included gold beets, bi-colored beets, black Spanish radishes, and leeks—all of which sold like hotcakes. The year before, it was corn salad, fancy French lettuce, and the lisianthus flower. The results were the same.

No market surveys, no opinion polls, no questioning of the experts. Just a sense that something different would sell at a farmers' market was enough to make it work. That's what apprentices are for.